

PRINTSHOP RESOURCE OPTIMIZATION VIA
THE USE OF AUTONOMOUS CELLS

Technical Field of the Invention

5 The present invention relates generally to printing and more particularly to optimization of printshop resources via the use of autonomous cells.

Background of the Invention

10 Conventional printshops are organized in a fashion that is functionally independent of print job complexity, print job mix, and total volume of print jobs. Typically, related equipment is grouped together. Thus, all printing equipment is grouped and located in a single locale. Similarly, all finishing equipment is grouped and located in a single locale. In other words, conventional printshops organize resources into separate departments, where each department corresponds to a type of process or
15 operation that is performed to complete a print job.

20 When a print job arrives from a customer, the print job sequentially passes through each department. Once the print job is completely processed by a first department, the print job gets queued for the next department. This approach continues until the print job is completed. Unfortunately, this conventional approach leads to significant time delays and increased work-in-progress and inventory costs.

Summary of the Invention

25 The present invention addresses the above-described limitations. In accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, a printshop is partitioned into autonomous cells. In addition, print jobs are partitioned into classes such that each autonomous cell contains sufficient resources to complete a print job of at least one class. Thus, for example, an autonomous cell may include equipment, such as multiple printers, a shrink wrapper and a computerized control system. A second autonomous cell may include different varieties of printers, cutters and copiers. The present
30 invention intelligently divides the resources into autonomous cells and then assigns print jobs to the autonomous cells.

35 The assignment of print jobs to autonomous cells is done intelligently to provide desired load balancing and throughput. Moreover, print jobs are assigned to cells based on whether the cells have sufficient types of resource to complete the print job. The assignment of print jobs to the autonomous cells may be determined dynamically based upon the current queue of print jobs, current available capacity and current operating loads of the respective autonomous cells. The structure and composition of the cells

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themselves may be determined dynamically based upon the profile of jobs to be performed by the printshop at any given time.

In accordance with one aspect of the present invention, a method is practiced in a printshop having resources for performing various tasks. The resources are divided into
5 autonomous cells, where each autonomous cell has sufficient resources to produce one or more classes of print job. Each print job is assigned to one of the cells for printing.

In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, a printshop is partitioned into autonomous cells, and a print job is received for printing at the printshop. The print job is sent to a selected one of the autonomous cells that has
10 equipment for completing the print job. Alternatively, the print job may be divided into lots and the lots are concurrently processed either on separate items of equipment in the selected autonomous cell or in separate cells.

In accordance with another aspect of the present invention, a method is practiced for partitioning a printshop into autonomous cells. Products that are to be produced by
15 the printshop are identified, and the operations required for each of the identified products are specified. A determination is made to specify the printshop resources that are received or required for the identified operations. A determination is also made to specify the printshop resources that are required for operations to produce the product based on customer demand for the products. The printshop resources are partitioned
20 into autonomous cells based on the determined number of printshop resources required for operations to produce products based on customer demand for products. Each autonomous cell is independently capable of producing at least one of the identified products. This partition is re-examined and re-optimized repeatedly as the customer demand for products changes.

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Brief Description of the Drawings

An illustrative embodiment of the present invention will be described below relative to the following drawings.

FIGURE 1 is a flow chart that provides an overview of steps that are performed
30 in the illustrative embodiment of the present invention.

FIGURE 2 is a flow chart that illustrates the steps that are performed to generate a graphical representation of job flow.

FIGURE 3 is an example of a graphical representation of printshop resources in accordance with the illustrative embodiment.

35 FIGURE 4 is a flow chart that illustrates the steps that are performed to partition printshop resources into autonomous cells from the job flow representation.

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FIGURE 7 is a flow chart illustrating steps that are performed in determining whether to assign a print job to a particular autonomous cell in the illustrative embodiment.

The illustrative embodiment of the present invention provides an approach to partitioning resources in a printshop efficiently so as to optimize performance of the printshop. Printshop resources, such as printers, copiers, cutters, shrinkwrappers and other varieties of equipment, are partitioned into autonomous cells. When a print job arrives, it is assigned to a particular autonomous cell for completion. Each autonomous cell may act independently from the other autonomous cells in processing a print job. Print jobs may be partitioned into smaller-sized lots that are concurrently processed by autonomous cells in order to optimize the efficiency and throughput of each autonomous cell. Moreover, multiple print jobs may be processed concurrently by an autonomous cell, and multiple print jobs may be executed concurrently by multiple autonomous cells in parallel.

Figure 1 shows a flow chart that provides an overview of steps performed in the illustrative embodiment of the present invention. Initially, the expected job flow in a printshop is collected and analyzed to determine the types (“classes”) of jobs to be performed and the number of each per unit time (step 102 in Figure 1). The printshop is analyzed to design and propose autonomous cells into which the printshop resources may be divided so as to optimize the flow of jobs through the shop (step 104 in Figure 1). Each autonomous cell represents a grouping of one or more resources in the printshop that is capable of executing at least one class of print job. The autonomous

cell may be able to complete the execution of multiple classes of print jobs or even all of the classes of print jobs. The partitioning of the resources into autonomous cells will be described in more detail below. A "printshop," as used herein, refers to a grouping of resources used in completing a print job. A printshop may be part of a corporation, a
5 free-standing shop, or other variety of organization.

Once the printshop resources have been divided into proposed autonomous cells, the proposed "virtual" cell configuration is tested and evaluated (step 106 in Figure 1). This testing and evaluation helps to ensure that the virtual cell configuration works well and produces acceptable results. If the proposed virtual cell configuration does not
10 produce acceptable results (see step 108 in Figure 1), the above-described process repeats again beginning with step 104 so as to design and propose new autonomous cells.

If the results are acceptable (see step 108 in Figure 1), then a detailed cell layout is constructed (step 110 in Figure 1). The workflow within the print job is restructured
15 to correspond with the cell layout. Scheduling algorithms are then constructed as well (step 112 in Figure 1). Once this is completed, the use of the autonomous cells becomes formally implemented (step 114 in Figure 1). The physical layout of the printshop may be restructured to account for the autonomous cells (step 116 in Figure 1).

In order to facilitate proper operation of the printshop to account for the use of
20 autonomous cells, printshop personnel must be properly trained (step 118 in Figure 1). The printshop personnel must perform necessary tasks and must understand how the cells operate. The initial execution within the printshop is monitored to ensure that performance is acceptable (step 120 in Figure 1). The scheduling algorithms may be tuned up to produce more optimal results in the response to the monitoring (step 122 in
25 Figure 1).

Figure 2 is a flow chart illustrating steps that are performed to produce a graphical representation of the job flow in the printshop. This job flow depicts operations performed by resources in the printshop. Printshop resources include equipment, such as printers, copiers, rollers, shrinkwrappers, sealers and other varieties
30 of equipment that are typically used to complete a print job. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that a wide variety of different types of equipment may be categorized as printshop resources, being included within autonomous cells in the illustrative embodiment. For example, manual resources may be partitioned as part of an autonomous cell.

35 In the illustrative embodiment of the present invention, the partitioning of the printshop into autonomous cells relies upon empirical data. The empirical data is gathered over a period of time, such as a few months or years, to identify the varieties of

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resources may include server computers that execute software for automatically assigning print jobs to given cells and for processing print jobs once they have arrived in given cells. Moreover, the computing resources 582, 584 and 586 may provide the ability of operators to control operation of the equipment within the cell.

- 5 Cell 2 includes a computer system 592 and a highlight printer 590. Cell 3 includes a printer 594 as well as a sealer 598 and computer system 596. Lastly, cell 4 includes a shrink wrapper 503, a computer system 505, a printer 507 and a roll system 509.

- 10 The resulting partitioning and mapping of autonomous cells is evaluated by computer simulation (step 404 in Figure 4). The computer simulation attempts to simulate real-time printshop operation conditions. Certain constraints may be placed upon the autonomous cells. In step 406 of Figure 4, a determination is made whether the constraints have been satisfied and whether the flow of operations between autonomous cells is minimal. In general, a cell should be self-contained such that there is no need for
- 15 a cell to communicate with another cell in order to complete a print job. If the inter-cell flows are small and the constraints are satisfied (see step 406 in Figure 4), the resulting cell layout and job class mapping algorithm are utilized. On the other hand, if the inter-cell flows are not small and the constraints are not satisfied, the inter-cell flow metric is revised to capture constraints in a different way (step 408 in Figure 4).

- 20 Figure 6 is a flow chart illustrating the steps that are performed when a print job is received in a printshop that has been organized into autonomous cells. Initially, a print job is received at the shop (Step 602 in Figure 6). The submission of the print job may be performed by a customer walking into the printshop and making a verbal request for a print job. Alternatively, the print job may be received electronically. The
- 25 specification of the print job identifies the tasks that are to be performed to complete the print job. This specification may also identify the timing required of the print job and particular features that are to be incorporated into the print job, such as type of printing to be used, type of stock to be used, whether binding is to be used and the like. The print job is analyzed to identify the operations that it requires and the quantity of
- 30 operations that are required by the job (step 604 in figure 6). A determination is made whether the print job can fit into an existing cell (step 606 in Figure 6). If the print job will fit into an existing cell, a cost estimate and a schedule for printing the print job are prepared (step 608 in Figure 6). If the cost and the schedule are acceptable to both the printshop and the customer (step 610 in Figure 6), the job is accepted (step 614 in Figure
- 35 6). If they are not acceptable to the printshop and/or the customer, the print job is rejected (step 612 in Figure 6). If the print job is accepted, it is assigned to an

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autonomous cell (step 616 in Figure 6) and subsequently sent to the autonomous cell (step 618 in Figure 6).

If in step 606 of Figure 6 it is determined that the print job does not fit into an existing cell, a determination is made whether it is feasible to have a new mapping onto the existing cells (step 620 in Figure 6). If it is feasible, such a mapping is performed so as to use existing cells (step 622 in Figure 6). If it is not feasible to map the print job onto the existing cells using a different mapping, an assessment of the print job value is made and an assessment is made of the reconfiguration cost which would be associated with reconfiguring the autonomous cells (step 624 in Figure 6). A cost estimate and schedule are prepared for performing the job in the reconfigured printshop (step 626 in Figure 6). If the cost and schedule are not acceptable to both the printshop and the customer (see step 628 in Figure 6), the print job is rejected (step 630 in Figure 6). In contrast, if the cost and schedule are acceptable to both the print job and to the customer, the printshop is reconfigured (step 632 in Figure 6). In particular, a new mapping of autonomous cells is generated. The print job is then assigned to one of the cells (step 634 in Figure 6) and sent to the associated cells (step 636 in Figure 6).

A number of different criteria may be applied to determine which autonomous cell to assign to a received print job. Figure 7 provides a flow chart illustrating an approach as adopted by the illustrative embodiment to the present invention. The cells may be examined in a predefined sequence, such as a round robin sequence or based upon utilization. For example, the process depicted in Figure 7 may initially begin with the least busy cell and continue with successively more busy cells until a suitable cell is found for processing the print job. Thus, initially, the cell of interest is examined (step 700 in Figure 7). First, a determination is made whether the cell has the proper resources for completing the print job (step 702 in Figure 7). For example, if a print job requires shrinkwrapping in the shop described in Figure 5 then cell 4 is used. Only cell 4 has a shrinkwrapper, and, thus, cells 1, 2 and 3 do not have the proper resources for completing the print job. A test may then be made whether the cell has sufficient available capacity to complete the print job within specified time requirements (step 704 in Figure 7). If a cell does not have enough capacity to print the print job in a timely fashion, then the cell may not be utilized to complete the print job. Those skilled in the art will appreciate that other criteria may also be applied (see step 706 in Figure 7) to determine whether to assign a print job to a given cell or not. In cases where the examined cells can not be used, a next cell is then examined (step 708 in Figure 7) until either it is validated that no suitable cell is available (step 707 in Figure 7) or until a suitable cell is found. If a suitable cell is found, the print job is assigned to the

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examined cell (step 710 in Figure 7). If no suitable cell can be found, the alternatives are examined as described in Figure 6.

While the present invention has been described with reference to an illustrative embodiment thereof, those skilled in the art will appreciate that various changes in form and detail may be made without departing from the intended scope of the present invention as defined in the appended claims.

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